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A unit for teaching dictionary skills through the compilation of a slang dictionary was written with the purpose of providing an inductive learning situation. The students are to begin by defining slang usage and bringing in slang words and definitions on cards. Small groups are to be formed to evaluate the definitions and make additions. In preparing to assemble the dictionary, an investigation will be made to determine what should be included in each entry and how it should be arranged. The various elements of pronunciation, syllabification, spelling, inflected forms, parts of speech, synonyms, etymology, literary allusions, and levels of usage are to be discussed, with the teacher providing examples for study. An innovative test construction is described for evaluation of the unit. Different situations involving a boy with whom the students can identify are described, and multiple choice responses are listed. Another evaluative method described involves role playing. References are included. (CM)

A UNIT

Teaching Dictionary Skills through A Slang Dictionary

by

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Project for

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Dr. Allen Berger

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Introduction

Slang dictionaries are not new. The idea of a slang dictionary is not new to most of the readers of this paper, who are probably familiar with articles in journals describing the methods which some English teacher used to encourage his students to put together a dictionary of slang terms. Or, if they have not read of these undertakings, they have heard of other teachers who have attempted this project, or they have tried it themselves. The uniqueness of this particular paper, in the author's opinion, lies in the premise that the slang dictionary should not be an end in itself, but instead it should serve as a device toward the study of the dictionary. That is, by having his students compile a dictionary of slang, the teacher will be teaching at the same time skills which his students can use with any dictionary.

Much of the methodology employed in this unit is hopefully inductive. In other words, the instructor expects his students to arrive at certain generalizations by themselves without having the teacher tell them everything.

The major objectives of this unit are the following:

To learn standards of usage in spoken language
To learn differences in dictionaries
To learn the elements of word entries in most dictionaries
To gain a basic understanding of the history of the English language

Many English teachers probably introduce a dictionary unit with some enthusiastic-inspiring sentence as, "And now, boys and girls, today we are going to discover what is inside a dictionary." They then proceed to distribute thirty dictionaries, one to each pupil and have the students work on mimeographed exercizes answering such questions as, "On what page is the word locution?" or "How many syllables does phylopteryx have?" This type of procedure has little meaning for most students, since there is little relationship between the exercize and the students' world.

The dictionary unit that is being proposed in this paper starts out with having the class write its own dictionary from words with which they are most familiar, particularly slang expressions. This paper is a description of the activities which may be involved in the unit.

To begin with, the students are asked to bring in three or more examples of slang expressions which they use or have heard. They should be informed that they are going to compile a dictionary of slang with the words they bring in. This assignment could result from a discussion of slang, along with why certain expressions are acceptable in some situations but not in others. The topic of slang could be initiated in numerous ways. For example, the class may have been reading a short story in which the characters spoke in dialect. Or possibly an editorial from a newspaper was read in which there was charged language. Novels also can lead students into talking about language. The novel The Light in the Forest contains an excellent example of how language can be emotional. Poetry can serve to illustrate connotative versus denotative meanings of words. Any one of the

above subjects, plus a myriad of others, can introduce the topic of meanings of words, and in particular, slang.

Once the teacher has led the discussion to a point at which he can introduce the assignment, he can ask the class to define a few slang expressions. For instance, he may ask, "What does flop mean in this sentence: 'The play was a complete flop'?" While attempting to define this word, the students may suggest other uses of flop, for example, "He flopped on to the bed," or "He lived in a flop-house." Other examples of words the teacher could use are fling as in, "He went out on a fling"; sends me, "His music sends me"; dig, "I don't dig this book"; pad, "Where is his pad?" Students will more than likely readily add their own examples.

The assignment to bring to class at least three examples of slang expressions can now be made. On a 3 by 5 note card, the student should indicate what part of speech the word is and he should use it in a sentence. For example:

> rat fink, n. a person who informs on others: That rat fink squealed on Spider for stealing the hub-caps.

Using one card for each expression will facilitate alphabatizing.

After the cards have been handed in, the teacher might quickly edit them for expressions which could have obscene connotations. During this time the students could be breaking up into small groups. The cards are then distributed to the groups, each group receiving approximately the same number of cards. A group leader then reads each expression, and the students discuss the meanings. A consensus might be arrived at as to

whether or not the student who turned in the card defined the word according to the way the group thought it should be. They might also determine if the student used the word correctly in the sentence. That is, did the definition apply to the meaning of the word in context? Also, if it was called a noun, was it used as a noun in the sentence? If any member of the group disagrees with the definition given, his definition should also be recorded on the card. As the students are working, the teacher can go from group to group to offer advice or to answer questions.

The responsibility of each group is to present these cards to the class with notations on what the group decided about whether or not the expression is appropriate for their slang dictionary. The group should also eliminate any duplications of expressions. Further discussion with the total class can be held about the decisions of each group.

The cards can easily be collected and alphabatized in this manner. The teacher can call for all cards beginning with A. If there are more than one, they can be further broken down into alphabetical order. This procedure can be followed throughout the alphabet. One can easily see what the teacher is accomplishing here--an inductive method of teaching alphabatizing with total cooperation of the class.

The next step involves putting the dictionary together. This process promotes the investigation of various dictionaries to see what lexicographers include for each word. An opportunity to study dictionaries of slang is also presented. For this purpose, the teacher should have available a class room

set of dictionaries. In addition, there should be single copies of four or five other dictionaries. The following is a list of dictionaries which would be helpful in this unit:

The American College Dictionary
Funk and Wagnall's Standard College Dictionary
The Random House Dictionary of the English Language
The Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary
Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language
Webster's Third New International Dictionary
Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary

A copy of the Dictionary of American Slang, edited by Harold Wentworth and Stuart B. Flexner, would be extremely useful, although other dictionaries of slang will suffice.

Assembling the Dictionary

Probably the first step in assembling the dictionary is to determine how the entries should be arranged. For this task, the students should examine various dictionaries. In locating this information, the students will also find a section which explains what is included with each entry. In most dictionaries, this will include the following:

1. Pronunciation
2. Spelling
3. Syllabication
4. Pictures, diagrams, maps
5. Inflected forms
6. Parts of speech
7. Synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, homographs
8. Etymology and derivatives
9. Literary allusions
10. Levels of usage

As the students find these elements, the teacher may list them, using either the chalk board or the overhead projector.

Pronunciation

The teacher now could direct the lesson toward which of these elements the students think they should include in their

slang dictionary. This is the point at which the teacher can induce the students to really find out what the elements mean. For example, the teacher may ask the students, "How do dictionaries show pronunciation?" More than likely, most of the students will be familiar enough with this element of a word entry that they will be able to answer this question. However, usually students know only that the "little marks" above the letters indicate how they should be pronounced, but the pupils are not familiar with the guide to pronunciation. They may know a long or short vowel sound, but they can not identify the nuances of sound between words like cȃre and ālē. A study of the pronunciation key and the words used to illustrate the sounds now is in order.

As part of this lesson students should note primary accent and secondary accent marks. To illustrate how the accent can change when used in different contexts or when another syllable is added, the teacher could write the word contract on the board and ask the students how they would pronounce the word. Obviously there will be disagreement, some students saying con′tract and others, contract′, both of which are correct. The next step is to have the students check the dictionary. Also, have them use each word in a sentence. Hopefully, they will arrive at the generalization that sometimes the pronunciation is determined by the way the word is used in a sentence. The term context might be introduced here. To further illustrate accents, the teacher might write these two words on the board: rascal-rascality. Probably the students will find

the second word difficult to pronounce if they place the accent on the first syllable. The dictionary will show that the emphasis is placed on the second syllable when we add the ity. Rapid and rapidity illustrate the same point. Students could be asked to supply other examples. (Mentioned might be these: morbid-morbidity; insane-insanity; sensible-sensibility; sensitive-sensitivity; solid-solidity).

When the teacher feels that the students have understood the guide to pronunciation, he should then let the class decide if this element is important enough to be included as part of their slang dictionary. The class may then move on to another element of the entry, possibly syllabication.

At this point the teacher might want to break the class up into their small groups. Each group could study two or three elements of a word entry, decide upon its importance, later report to the whole class, and present their opinion about the relevancy of the item.

Syllabication

More than likely the term syllabication will need to be defined. (The reader will note that the primary accent in syllable changes from the first syllable to the second syllable in syllabication, as in the words rapid and rapidity. The teacher might attempt to get the students to note the parallel.) By having the students look up certain words in various dictionaries, the teacher should help the students to understand how words are syllabicated. For example, how is the word tobacco divided? What mark is used between the

syllables? When the teacher feels that the students have gained an understanding of syllabication, he should have the class decide upon including this element as part of the word entry in their slang dictionary.

Spelling

The group may want to discuss spelling next. The students should discover that there are variant spellings to some words (increase, encloses) and should find out how dictionaries indicate which is preferred. Also, british spelling (flavor, flavour) should be noted. To assist the students in spelling their slang words, they should refer to standardized spellings in the dictionaries they are using.

Pictures, Diagrams, Maps

The students will probably not want to include any pictures, diagrams, or maps to help define their slang expressions. However, if they feel that there are some terms which could be better explained by use of these aids, by all means include them. The students will note that some dictionaries contain few pictorial explanations while others contain many. Also, the teacher may have students decide why some dictionary editors include visual aids and what kinds of words are usually selected.

Inflected forms

How are the plurals of nouns and the principal parts of verbs formed may be another element to be discussed by the group. Questions such as the following could serve as guide-

lines. How do most dictionaries indicate the plural form of nouns? If the plural is given as ies, what does this mean? If the plural is not listed, what should one assume for its formation? How do many foreign words form their plurals? (bacterium-bacteria; parenthesis-parentheses; alumnus-alumni; alumna-alumnae; crisis-crises) Do most dictionaries include a section which lists some guidelines for forming plurals? (The students might further hypothesize as to why there is inconsistency in the formation of plurals. Their guesses might create interest in a study of the history of the language.) The inflected forms of verbs could be learned in much the same manner as the plurals of nouns. Guideline words which the students may look up to base their generalizations upon are ricochet, climb, dive, see, open, pattern, and hang.

Parts of speech

The parts of speech a word may be used as may be considered. Students should discover that some words may be used as three or more parts. Finding words to illustrate this point should present no problem.

Synonyms, Antonyms, Homonyms, Homographs

The terms synonym and antonym are probably familiar ones to most students. Many of them may also know what homonyms are. The meaning of homographs will probably not be known. The students should discover that the pronunciation of homographs depends upon the context. To illustrate this, the teacher may use sentences such as, "He read the book," or "will you read to me?" Another common example is, "The melted lead was

poured into the mold," and "Lead the way to the cabin." (The reader will note that the word mold in the example above could also be used to illustrate mariant spellings.) After studying these four terms, the students may want to include synonyms in their word entries.

Etymology and Derivations

The study of the history of the English language and of word derivations is a course in itself. For this particular unit, however, one would not be expected to treat the material in depth. The teacher might attempt to interest the students in word origins and might provide some exercizes such as the following to serve this purpose. Have students look up these words: Lilliputian, helium, moony, lunatic, poncho, coupe. Are these English words? If not, from what languages do they come? Can you tell how long they have been a part of the English language?

As they work on this exercize, students will note certain abbreviations, for example, OE, ME, OF, L, Gr, AS. They should at least know how to find out what these abbreviations stand for. Hopefully, the students will see that English is a conglomeration of many languages, and that language has changed tremendously in 15 centuries.

There is a strong possibility that the students will not know the origins of their slang terms which they are including in their own dictionary. If they do know the origin, they may feel that this element is important enough to be included in the word entry. The Dictionary of American Slang may be

of help.

The study of prefixes, suffixes, and root words should probably receive only a cursory study for this unit. One excellent source of prefixes and suffixes is the Arco Course-Spelling, Vocabulary, and Grammar. Pages 2 through 13 are especially helpful.

Literary Allusions

Only a few minutes need to be spent with literary references in order to acquaint the students with this source of information. The time spent with this area can be quite profitable when the students are reading. The teacher may have the students look up a few words in either the main part of the dictionary or in the section on biographical names, if the latter is included. Some examples are paladin, Marathon, Galahad, El Dorado, satanic.

Levels of Usage

It is important that the students understand the role of a lexicographer in putting together a dictionary. That is, dictionary compilers are only describing the language; they are not prescribing what people should use. Their responsibility lies only in keeping an accurate record of what is in common usage. The students should keep this in mind as they are making their dictionaries.

This section, levels of usage, might be considered the most important outcome of this total unit, since the students are primarily concerned with a particular level, one that is considered non-standard. They should become familiar with such terms as slang, informal, standard, colloquial, dialect, ob-

solete, archaic, poetic, and British. The following activities may help the students to arrive at an understanding of these terms and of usage.

1. Look up juke box in different dictionaries. What does colloq. mean for this word? (Other words that might be used are long shot, intended, bleed.)

2. Look up the words loaf, pooch, ain't, adorable, corn, mizzle in various dictionaries. What usage labels are given to these words?

3. What is a slapjack? What is johnny cake? Where are these expressions used? Can a poke be a bag or a sack?

4. Check several dictionaries for the meaning of bagman. In what country is it used?

5. What do different dictionaries say about the meaning of corn in England? in Scotland and Ireland?

6. Why are dictionaries revised occasionally?

Since the students are compiling a dictionary of slang, they will not find it necessary to attack usage labels to their word entries.

Printing the Dictionary

When the teacher senses that the students have learned some techniques for using a dictionary as a tool to better understanding, he can initiate the final steps in the publication of the slang dictionary. A final check sould be made to see that there is uniformity in all word entries. If some students can type, they may be assigned the job of typing the ditto masters or mimeograph stencils. If there are no typists, the teacher will be responsible for completing this task. It might be advisable to follow the format of most dictionaries. In addition, the names of the students who participated in the project should be listed.

Related Activities

To stimulate interest in the total project, the teacher should see that copies of the slang dictionary are distributed to various people such as the principal, other teachers, or the librarian. These people might also be invited to visit the class at different times while the students are working on the project.

The students may also ask their parents to define some of the slang terms. This may illustrate to the students the fact that slang terms are many times restricted to certain groups.

Some students may want to read more books about the changing language and report to the class. Others may make bulletin board displays. The teacher and the students could use their ingenuity in devising related activities.

Evaluation

To evaluate this unit, the typical teacher could easily make up an objective exam using the commonly-used types of questions, i.e., multiple choice, matching, completion, or true-false. Or he may have the students answer an essay-type question.

However, the type of examination that is being proposed in this paper is somewhat different from the traditional kind. Hopefully, it will give the teacher an indication of whether or not his methods were successful. The test is to be organized in this manner: The test items will be based upon various situations with which a student can identify. These situations will revolve around Mickey, whose age could be about the age of the students in the class. The first part of the test item will present Mickey in a situation in which he is expected to react to a statement or a question. There will then be two or three possible responses for him to make. The student is to select which response he feels is most appropriate for the situation, and which on is inappropriate. For example:

Situation A: Mickey is a junior in high school. He is applying for a job as a stock boy in a department store near his home. He is being interviewed by the manager of the store. The manager asks him why he needs the job. Which reply to the manager's question do you think Mickey should give? which one would not fit the occasion?

Manager: Why do you need this job, Mickey?

Mickey: a. 'cause I need the jack for my wheels.
b. I am planning to buy a car this year.

Situation B: Mickey is at his home with two of his friends. They are in the basement watching TV and playing pool. Jack asks Mickey what Mick plans to do Saturday night. What might Mick's reply be?

a. Oh, I think I'll just goof off around here.
b. Oh, I think that I will stay at home idly passing the time.

To test the students' knowledge of dictionary skills, the teacher could employ the same technique. For example, to test the students' ability to break a word into syllables, an item such as this could be used.

Situation: Mickey is writing a report for history. He wants the paper to look neat and is very concerned about the width of margins on the paper. He wants to use the word <u>constitutional</u> but can fit only about half of the word on the line. Where should he break the word?
a. const-itutional
b. constit-utional
c. consti-tutional

<u>To test preferred spelling</u>:

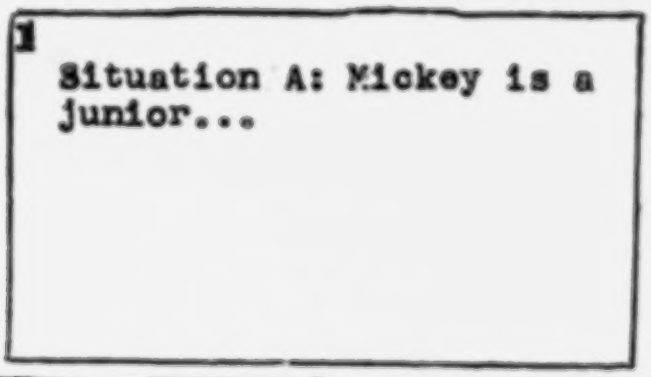
Situation: Mickey does not know which spelling is preferred-<u>sirup</u> or <u>syrup</u>. According to your dictionary, which one is preferred?
a. sirup
b. syrup

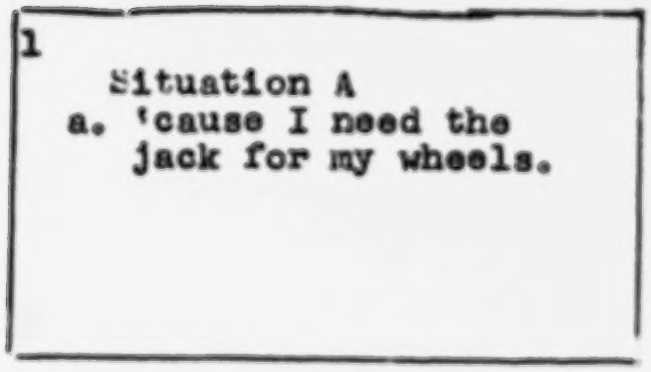
<u>To test knowledge of synonyms or antonyms</u>:

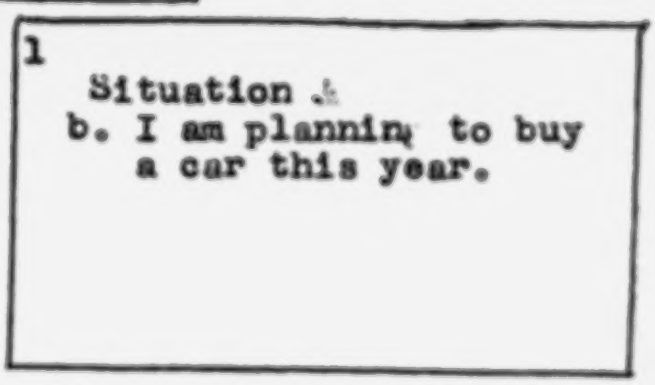
Situation: Mickey needed to know how to write the plural form of <u>elf</u>. What did he find in his dictionary?
a. elfes
b. elves
c. elfs

The above are only a few examples of the types of questions that the teacher could compose for this test.

The actual construction of the testing situation needs to be described at this point. Instead of putting the test items on a ditto master or a stencil and reproducing the test on a piece of paper as most tests are, the teacher could make the test seem more like an activity. Many students are frightened by normal testing situations and tend to do poorly because of this fear. Instead, the teacher could put the items on 3 by 5 cards. (A ditto master could still be used.) The situation would be described on one card and each alternative answer on separate cards as illustrated below:







When he receives his packet of test cards, the student places the preferred responses in one pile and the inappropriate responses in another. When the student is finished, a rubber band or a paper clip could be used to keep the piles of cards separated. Checking the test would involve taking the cards in the "preferred" pile to see if they match the teacher's answers.

After the test has been graded, the teacher could have the class divide into small groups to discuss their responses, particularly the items pertaining to levels of usage.

Another method of evaluation could involve role-playing on the part of the students. They could set up situations in which one student could play the part of a person asking directions. Another student could reply using different levels of usage.

Summary

This paper has described a method for teaching dictionary skills by having students compose their own slang dictionary. The length of the unit is flexible, depending upon the grade level, the mental capacity of the students, and the amount and kinds of related activities the teacher and students conduct. It is hoped that the students will learn the material inductively, and that what they do learn will help them to become better readers and to live more productive and profitable lives.

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